

# ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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## **New school district for Jacksonville examined (Jacksonville Patriot)**

The desire to form a school district for Jacksonville is nothing new to some people, according to a report released recently about the feasibility of potentially creating a Jacksonville-North Pulaski School District.

“Leaders in the Jacksonville community have worked to establish an independent school district in the Jacksonville area since the late 1960s,” states the report called “A Feasibility Study for a Jacksonville-North Pulaski School District detached from the Pulaski County Special School District.”

The report was prepared for the Jacksonville Education Foundation Inc. Its author is Winston F. Simpson, Ed.D. “The effort began in response to the view that the affairs of the Pulaski County Special School District were in disarray.”

At that time, the Jacksonville Jaycees and Southwest Little Rock Jaycees began a campaign to seek the resignation of some members of the school board.

“Four of the eight board members and the superintendent resigned,” states the report. “It was thought that this change in leadership personalities in the [county district] would change matters for the better. It did not.”

Community members headed an effort to establish a separate school district for the Jacksonville area.

“To date, efforts to establish a new school district in the Jacksonville area have not succeeded. The people involved have changed over the years but the effort continues,” states the report.

The affairs of the district were in such disarray in June 2011 that the Arkansas Department of Education dissolved the school board of the district and dismissed its superintendent.

The problems with the district are part of the reason the Jacksonville-North Pulaski area should be granted their own school district according to the report.

“The Commissioner of Education services as the [district’s] school board, and he has appointed a superintendent,” according to the report. “The time is right for the formation of a school district in the Jacksonville area.”

Current leaders in the effort to form a school district in the Jacksonville area believe that the community is better positioned to provide excellent educational opportunities for students in their area than the district.

“That belief is based on the view that the new district will be composed of a citizenry with an established sense of community focused on the Jacksonville area and the Little Rock Air Force Base,” states the report. “The new district would include approximately 100 contiguous square miles containing one incorporated city. The [county district] is comprised of approximately 730 square miles that includes all or parts of several incorporated cities.”

Geographically, the district is a doughnut around the cities of Little Rock and North Little Rock and the Little Rock and North Little Rock school districts.

The goals of the leaders seeking the formation of the new district are as follows: Provide academic excellence; Establish a safe environment; Ensure equal and equitable educational opportunity; Improve facilities and establish standards of maintenance; Assure an effective student-teacher ratio; Improve communication between administration, staff and parents; Encourage parent participation and Restore pride in Jacksonville-area schools.

“Six studies support formation of a school district in the Jacksonville area,” states the report.

Two such studies were conducted by ECS Planning and Management Services Inc. and were completed in 1978 and in November 2002. The third study, referred to as the “Gordon Report,” was commissioned by the state department of education “to conduct an analysis to evaluate and determine the most feasible public school structure that will best meet the educational needs in Pulaski County and to provide recommendations as to how the ongoing school desegregation litigation in Pulaski County might be ended.”

The fourth study was completed by Dr. Don Stewart in August 2008 while the fifth one was completed by Dr. William M. Gordon and William R. Gordon in 2010. The 2010 report includes the several conclusions:

The new district would meet all requirements for Unitary Status. “The Jacksonville schools have met the Green factors in good faith to the extent practicable.”

Past studies also had concluded that the Jacksonville area breaking off from PCSSD would not adversely impact unitary status for that district.

The report indicates that the sixth report is the current feasibility study.

There are two actions taken by the school board that directly relate to the matter of forming a new Jacksonville-area school district, according to the report.

In a school board meeting held on April 14, 2009, the board adopted a resolution regarding repayment of second lien bonds that included the following its acknowledgment of a new and independent Jacksonville School District.

In addition, the school board did calculate bonds for the construction of new a new Oak Grove and Sylvan Hills high schools that did not require a to-be-formed Jacksonville School District to assume more than its proportionate share of those bonds now existing within the county district, states the report.

At its meeting of July 29, 2009, the district adopted a resolution which expressed support for the creation of a Jacksonville-North Pulaski School District.

“The [county district] acknowledges that there will not be a Jacksonville/North Pulaski school district unless and until such proposed district complies ... (state code)... including if necessary approval of the presiding federal district judge in the desegregation case.”

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## **Students statewide undergo benchmark testing (Advanced Monticellonian)**

This week every school district in the state is asking that students be at school on time after eating a healthy breakfast so they can do their best on the annual benchmark tests.

While every parent and student has heard about the benchmark, some parents don't really know what it is and why it's important.

Bobby Harper, superintendent for Monticello School District, said the easy way to understand the benchmark is to think of it like a report card for the district. The test shows the students' strengths and weaknesses, and it shows where the school can improve.

The teachers at Monticello Intermediate School spent a lot of time telling their students why they should do their absolute best on the benchmark.

“We want our students to do their absolute best,” Sandy Funderburg said. “That means they should eat breakfast each morning but especially during benchmark.”

She said it's been proven by studies that students perform better after having eaten a good breakfast.

MIS students viewed a video about the benchmark last week.

At Drew Central, the students have also spent weeks preparing for the exam.

Patti Smith, literacy coach, held a special “spy camp” for students in the third and fourth grade during the last month to help prepare them for the exam.

“We worked on different things they will be tested on during our camp,” Smith said. “The whole district has been working on various aspects of the test. I think our kids are ready.”

After a year of preparing, administrators knew the students needed to have little fun so Thursday afternoon the elementary and middle school held a Benchmark Pep Rally.

The rally consisted of several classes singing parody songs about the benchmark. Between the acts, the junior high and high school cheerleaders cheered their classmates on with Pirate cheers.

“They’ve worked so hard. We like to let them yell and cheer and have fun before the benchmark,” Joy Graham, middle school principal, said.

Trudy Jackson, DCE principal, said that every parent needs to know that these tests are so important to the school.

“They tell the state if we are doing our jobs teaching our students,” Jackson said.

Tips for good test taking include getting a good night’s sleep the night before and eating a healthy breakfast each morning.

Drew Central has Breakfast in the Classroom, where each child eats breakfast for free in the classroom.

“With our Breakfast in the Classroom program, we can at least make certain every child has a proper breakfast every day including days during the benchmark testing,” Jackson said.

Once the testing is complete, the schools are notified of the scores in early summer.

Since the implement of Common Core State Standards, the U.S. Department of Education has given Arkansas a waiver so the state no longer falls under the No Child Left Behind law, which means the schools will not be penalized based on the current benchmark exams.

“We use these tests to see where we stand,” Harper said. “They are very important tests for every school in the state.”

Next year, or school year 2013-14, Common Core State Standards will be fully implemented in both Drew Central and Monticello School Districts. However, the schools will not be tested under those new standards until 2014-15, unless they opt to take the PARCC assessments early.

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### **Bill to pare retiree system’s shortfalls advances (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)**

A bill allowing the Arkansas Teacher Retirement System’s board of trustees to increase the amount it charges school districts and other system employers cleared a legislative committee late Wednesday.

The Joint Committee on Public Retirement and Social Security Programs endorsed House Bill 1199 by Rep. David Kizzia, D-Malvern.

It would allow the trustees to increase the 14 percent employer-contribution rate in the fiscal year starting July 1, 2015 and each fiscal year thereafter by only 0.25 percent per fiscal year, if the system's actuary projects the system's payback period for its unfunded liabilities exceeds 30 years.

The system's actuary in December projected that the system's payback period for its unfunded liabilities exceeded 100 years as of June 30.

An increase in the 14 percent rate "shall only occur if the system implements cost savings from member benefit programs and increased member contributions, measured after July 1, 2013, that equal or exceed the value of the employer contribution increase before or at the same time as an employer contribution increase," the bill states.

The rates wouldn't be allowed not to rise before July 1, 2015.

Kizzia said his HB1199 bill is an extension of Senate Bill 162 with limits requested to ensure the state isn't stuck with the entire financial burden as it works to reduce the payback period for the unfunded liabilities.

A 0.25 percent increase in the employer contribution rate would raise about \$7 million more a year, and 1 percent increase would raise about \$28 million a year, committee actuary Jody Carreiro said.

Kizzia said it would be easier for the state to shoulder the cost for a 0.25 percent increase instead of a 1 percent increase in a year.

"Member contributions [of 6 percent of salary] may have to go up or benefits may need to be restricted, so that everybody has some investment on putting the system on a stronger financial footing," he said.

SB162 is one of several bills that the system has asked lawmakers to approve to increase system revenue and decrease costs to reduce the system's unfunded liabilities, which totaled \$4.6 billion as of June 30.

The unfunded liabilities are the amount by which the system's liabilities exceed the actuarial value of the system's assets. The system's investments are valued at more than \$12 billion.

SB162 by Sen. Eddie Cheatham, D-Crossett, would allow the system's trustees to increase the rate charged to system employers from 14 percent of employee payroll to a maximum of 15 percent, effective July 1, 2013, if a system actuary projects it would take more than 30 years to pay off the system's unfunded liabilities.

The legislation also would require any employer-rate increase be paid from funds appropriated to the state Department of Education.

System Executive Director George Hopkins told lawmakers last month that the earliest trustees could raise the rate charged to system employers would be July 1, 2015, under SB162 because it's clear that

lawmakers don't intend to appropriate money to the Education Department for fiscal 2014 to pay for the rate increase.

If the trustees increased the rate from 14 percent of employee payroll to 15 percent, that would cost system employers about \$28.4 million more a year. System employers pay about \$400 million year into the system, he said.

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## **Trial Dates Set For Lavaca Alderman (Southwest Times Record)**

Multiple charges alleging sexual improprieties by a Lavaca alderman and former teacher continue to work their way through Sebastian County Circuit Court.

On Wednesday, it was determined a trial date on two counts of sexual indecency with a child filed against Jack Woodrow James, 52, would be set for sometime after a trial scheduled for June 17 on a second-degree sexual assault charge.

James is scheduled to be back in court May 8 for a mandatory appearance on a third count of sexual indecency with a child.

On Nov. 7, Sebastian County District Court Judge Wayland Parker III sentenced James to one year in jail and a \$1,000 fine, \$4,000 total, on each of three counts of attempted sexual indecency with a child and one count of harassment. The judge ordered the sentences to run consecutively.

James appealed the district court decision to circuit court, where a trial is scheduled for July 18.

The misdemeanor indecency charges involve James asking two students to show him their genitals, which they refused to do, according to an arrest warrant affidavit. The harassment charge involves James telling a male student he wanted to have sex with him and fantasized about sex with him, according to the affidavit.

The felony indecency charges involve James either pulling down a student's pants to expose their genitals or him persuading them to expose their genitals, according to court documents.

All of the alleged inappropriate behavior — except for the alleged sexual assault — took place in James' classroom, according to arrest warrant affidavits.

The sexual-assault case involves an allegation that in 2006, James touched the genitals of a minor male in a van outside James' home where the boy was visiting James' sons, according to an Arkansas State Police report.

The boy, who is now an adult, told a forensic interviewer that James asked him how big he had gotten before grabbing his genitals, and he slapped away James' hand, according to the ASP report.

The boy said he remembered James trying to apologize to him after the incident.

James told an ASP special agent that while he was giving the boy a ride home, the boy exposed himself. He said he turned and slapped the boy in the area near his penis and told him to stop, according to an ASP report.

Sexual indecency with a child is a Class D felony punishable by up to six years in prison. Second-degree sexual assault is a Class B felony punishable by five to 20 years in prison.

James is free on a \$10,000 bond.

James was a social studies teacher at Lavaca Middle School and retired in May 2012 after the complaints were turned over to local law enforcement, Lavaca Superintendent Steve Rose said previously. James was elected in 2010 as Lavaca city alderman for Ward 1 and was unopposed in the Nov. 6 general election.

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### **Body of teacher is found on park trail (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)**

A North Little Rock high school teacher was found dead Tuesday on a trail at Pinnacle Mountain State Park, an Arkansas State Police spokesman said.

Michael J. Nahas, 45, was found dead near the crest of the 1 ½-mile long East Summit Trail, spokesman Bill Sadler said. State police special agents are investigating and are waiting for test results from the state Crime Laboratory, he said.

Nahas worked as a science and art teacher for sophomores through seniors for about six years at the North Little Rock High School, a district spokesman said.

The park was closed shortly after the body was found. It reopened at its regular time Wednesday.